

GULF COASTAL ECOSYSTEM LEARNING CENTER NETWORK – A COMPREHENSIVE FIVE STATE FRAMEWORK

Needs and opportunities identified by Gulf States in Education White Paper:

- ♦ “Take advantage of existing, well-funded environmental programs to educate and involve citizens about these priority problems identified by the Gulf Alliance.”
- ♦ “Utilize the success of existing programs...[which] represent partnerships at the federal, state, and local level that can bring public and private sector interests together to address local needs.”
- ♦ “Effective environmental education along the Gulf Coast is hindered by...[d]isparity between the Coastal States’ capabilities and subsequent funding. The five Gulf States have ecologically significant coastlines, but with dramatic differences in the size of their coastlines. These differences lead to increased education opportunities in some states but reduced opportunities in others.”

Federal Response: The Federal Workgroup proposes expanding the network of Coastal Ecosystem Learning Centers (CELCs) to all five Gulf States and Mexico and developing a formal Gulf States education and outreach planning and management team.

In 1996, the Coastal America Partnership established a network of Coastal Ecosystem Learning Centers (CELCs). The network combines the resources of Federal agencies with marine educational centers. The Gulf of Mexico region is currently comprised of three centers in three of the five states within the region; these centers include:

- ♦ Texas State Aquarium (Corpus Christi, TX)
- ♦ Dauphin Island SeaLab (Dauphin Island, AL)
- ♦ Florida Aquarium (Tampa, FL)

The goal of each Learning Center is to educate and involve the public in protecting our nation's coastal ecosystems. Under the umbrella partnership, CELCs have access to things that they would not normally have. For example, the Federal partnership under-pinning these centers provides them unique access to expert speakers, exhibit information, educational publications, teaching materials, field trip sites, and scientific data from around the country. Millions of residents and visitors visit the Learning Centers each year.

An enhanced and better integrated CELC network in the Gulf region has the potential to substantially address many of the issues outlined in the Alliance White Paper. This proposal would immediately expand the network to include centers in Mississippi, Louisiana and at least one border Mexican State. Likely choices for the new centers include Mississippi's J.L. Scott Marine Education Center in Biloxi, MS; the Audubon's Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans, LA; and the Coastal Aquarium in Vera Cruz, MX.

The second step of this proposal would involve working with the Gulf of Mexico Alliance and the Gulf States Accord to develop a formal Gulf States education and outreach planning and management team. The purpose of this team would be to prioritize the focus of education and

training programs needed to make these concentration centers most effective in addressing regional coastal environmental education needs.

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Federal Workgroup Co-leads: EPA, ACOE, NOAA

Other partners: DOI, USDA, HHS/FDA, DOD, DOS, DOT

This Federal Response Proposal represents an initial project idea from the 13 agencies represented on the Federal Workgroup, in response to the Gulf State Alliance white papers; it is meant to stimulate discussion, among the Gulf State Alliance and the Federal Workgroup, as they work toward the development of a draft Gulf Plan of Action. Implementation of this project idea is subject to further evaluation and the availability of funding.